GOD HAS MANY NAMES:
II. CREATOR...PROVIDER

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John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31
Matthew 6:25-33

..."do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink..." -Matthew 6:25 (NSRV)

In his book, Returning, about which I have spoken before and to which I should like to return, Dan Wakefield, a novelist and screenwriter, tells the personal story of his unexpected, surprising spiritual awakening in the middle of his life and his return to religion. After a major physical and emotional breakdown, he changed his lifestyle dramatically; moved from Los Angeles back to Boston, which move in itself significantly lowered his pulse and blood pressure; and on Christmas Eve did something entirely uncharacteristic. An avowed atheist for years with absolutely no interest in religion, he went to church. A few months later, on Easter Sunday, he went back. He reflects:

> "I was both intrigued and apprehensive. My two initial trips of return had been on major holidays, occasions when 'regular' people went to church, simply in observance of tradition. To go back again meant crossing Boston Commons on a non-holiday Sunday morning wearing a suit and tie, a giveaway sign of church-going. I did it furtively, as if I were engaged in something that would not be approved of by my peers. I hoped they would all be home doing brunch and the Sunday papers, so I would not be 'caught in the act.' I recalled the remark of William F. Buckley, Jr. in a television interview that if you mention God more than once at New York dinner parties, you aren't invited back."
> [p. 14-15]

To his surprise Wakefield discovered once inside that he recognized neighbors and even a few friends. "Here they were, with intellect intact, worshipping God."

Wakefield, with a refreshing directness, puts his finger on a major issue for us. How to worship God unapologetically, out in the open, with our intellects intact? For somewhere deep within us, or most of us, is a suspicion that you can't do it, that believing in God means shutting down your intellectual energies, or at least, parking your mind - your critical and analytical faculties - outside on the sidewalk, before you come to worship. Somewhere there is a suspicion that belief and trust are

incompatible with what we know about the world and history and ourselves... particularly the world.

The poet A. E. Housman once said that our problem is that we have to "find a place for ourselves in a world we never made." And it's true. It would be nice to be able to view the world in the same way they did in 1620 or 1776 or 1812, or in the same way our great-grandparents did, or even our parents, but we cannot. We know too much. We have seen too much. We are no longer innocent. We know about Auschwitz and Hiroshima; we know about rain forests shrinking and global warming and starvation and the simple fact that we are not managing our home on earth very well at all. It is not a world we made. It is not a world we intend or mean. And it confronts us with a religious problem as old as time itself, and yet as immediate as yesterday's paper.

How to say "God" in the modern world is the way Dr. Jack Stotts puts it. How to say God with integrity and with evangelical fervor is the way theology puts it. How to say God in a way that is faithful to the traditions of the past, but also honest about the realities of the present.

Some of the old ways of saying God simply don't work anymore. Some are saying that if the only names we have for God are masculine, they feel left out; if the only image we have of God is a male image, we either haven't read the Bible accurately or we are seriously interested in a system that benefits somehow by God's masculinity.

Some are saying that if the only words we have for God are authoritative names, powerful and coercive, or judgmental, stern, demanding names, they can't connect. Some are saying that if the only names for God we have are "Almighty Father," "Lord and Master," they don't recognize that as the God we believe became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth who seemed intentionally to avoid those very words and concepts and the ideologies that go along with them.

The oldest of our theological traditions about God's names holds that God being God is not knowable and therefore unnameable: that every naming of God limits God; that every name - being a small piece of the truth about God - when it becomes the only piece, becomes an idol and actually gets in the way of the true reality.

So the ancient Hebrews didn't ever say the name. In Hebrew God's name is a mysterious list of consonants - YHWH, which when you weave in a few vowels, sounds like Yahweh.

When God finds Moses in the wilderness tending his father-in-law's sheep and tells Moses to go back to Egypt and bring the people to the Promised Land and Moses asks for God's name so that he can tell the people who has sent him and in whose name he speaks, the only answer Moses gets is "Yahweh, I am who I am." It's not a name at all. It's not a proper noun. It's a verb. "Tell them 'I am' sent you." And the people who study the languages tell us you can also translate it:

> "I will be who I will be, and
> I will be present, and
> I will create what I will create."

So God doesn't have a real name because a name can become an idol, a distortion which is exactly what you have if you only have one name for God. God's only name is, "I am... I will be" and that name invites us to complete it. God has many names.

I am your father...

I am your mother...

I am your creator is one name of God many people have used for thousands of years.

Provider is a similar one. They are among the oldest names of God and in this world, at this time, they are among the most difficult for us. That is, they are the names that tempt us to park our intellects outside before coming in here and singing, reading and praying to God our creator and our provider.

For me, John Updike keeps identifying, struggling with and writing about the big religious issues. His most recent book is the fourth and final novel about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. Updike's readers have been following Rabbit through a modern American life for thirty years. Now Rabbit is fifty-five, semi-retired from his Toyota agency in Reading, Pennsylvania, lives in Florida in the winter, is worried about his son, overweight, has trouble with his digestive system and his heart, and thinks a lot about dying. And although he does not use religious language, and although Rabbit is not traditionally religious, Updike keeps slipping theology into the story.

Rabbit is in the hospital after a heart attack, trying to watch the NFC playoff game in Soldier Field, when the fog blew in off the lake and reflects, "The announcers seem indignant that God could do this; mess with CBS and blot out a TV show the sponsors are paying a million dollars a minute for and millions are watching." [p. 163]

But it's his own mortality documented by his own aging that he can't seem to forget. And it is here that Updike frames the theological dilemma which occurs if you call God creator and provider and at the same time keep your intellect functioning. He can't seem to escape reminders of mortality. Taking his grandchildren on an outing in Florida, a guide is droning on and on about a Banyan tree... how they "spread by dangling down roots and making new trunks that become like crutches as they spread out and out - those creeping trees will go for miles if nobody stops them. 'How do they die?'"

That God is creator is little consolation when the story always ends the same way. The philosophers have always known that. In fact, it casts a pall over all of life. The guide is now talking about an amazing variety of exotic tropical trees.

"Why did God bother," Harry wonders, "to do all these tricks by Himself in the Amazon Jungle." The guide goes on... "The leaves are chocolate brown on one side and white on the other and because of their unusual shapes and lasting qualities are in great demand for dried floral

arrangements. You can purchase these leaves in our gift shop." Rabbit thinks, "So God did it so people would have something to buy in gift shops." [p. 93-94]

"In the beginning when God created," the ancient text announces. And we know now that the ancient writer was not preparing a science lesson. Rather he was addressing a community of Jewish exiles in Babylon who were wondering what was going to happen to them and where their God was. It was not a world they made. They had been violently dragged from their home - the land God gave them - were dislocated, living apart from everything that was solid and good and hopeful. That is, their situation was not so terribly different from our own. Things, for them, seemed out of control.

The theological affirmation that God is creator, that in the beginning God created, is first of all good news to people who need to know all is not lost. Notice that it is not intended as an explanation of how we got here. That, of course, is the big stumbling block in Biblical interpretation. If Genesis 1 is scientific information, then either modern science must be all wrong, or else the Bible is completely off base. If you are a literalist about the creation story, you must deny the credibility of all reputable modern biological science. That is, you must park your intellect outside.

But if it is not science, if it is Good News about God's relationship to the world, then you are free, encouraged in fact, to pursue scientific inquiry into the nature of the world and its mysterious processes, while at the same time holding tightly to your belief in, faith and trust in the one who is creator. Stephen Hawking, the brilliant British astrophysicist, whose book, A Brief History of Time, is still on the best seller lists, set out to explain how we got here - "from the Big Bang to Black Holes." In the introduction, Carl Sagan says, "This is a book about God." And that opens up a whole spectrum of possibilities.

In the first place it allows us to take seriously the proclamation in the Genesis story... that the world and all that is in it - because it is God's creation - is intrinsically and fundamentally good. After each stage of creation in the ancient story God looks at it and declares that it is good. Walter Bruggemann points out that the word "good" which is used here is not ethical quality but an aesthetic. "Lovely" is a better translation. And God blessed them, saying "be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply... And God saw that it was lovely."

Now that is an important word because the truth is that religion often comes to the opposite conclusion; namely that the world is not so good. "Worldly" has come to mean something negative, something unreligious. God, religion often concludes, is hostile to the world. But here, at the foundation, is a religion that calls the world good and describes God as delighting in, enjoying the creation.

So the Psalmist describes all of creation singing its praise to a creator who obviously has thoroughly enjoyed the results. "Praise Him sun and moon, praise Him all you shining stars, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind."

And poets stretch for words big enough...

> "O World, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide gray skies!
> Thy mists that roll and rise!
> Lord, I do fear
> Thous't made the world too
> beautiful this year."
> [God's World, Edna St. Vincent Millay]

and

> "thank you God for most this amazing
> day: for the leaping greenly spirits of
> trees and a blue true dream of sky;
> and for everything which is natural which
> is infinite which is yes."
> [e.e. cummings]

Episcopal theologian, Robert Farrar Capon, in a witty fable about an oyster who is lamenting its lowly estate on the evolutionary ladder and wondering what in the world God had in mind, whining in Job-like complaints, God finally responds:

> "All right already. There are things you never dreamed of. All kinds of stuff. And with moves you couldn't imagine if you tried. As a matter of fact that's your problem. There you sit with a rock on one side and a starfish on the other. My apologies. It's a limited field of vision, I admit, but in the evolutionary scale business, you've got to put a lot of things near the bottom. Spoils the effect if you don't.
>
> "Anyway the moves. I'll tell you a few. Basketball. The best ones are so flashy, they make you laugh for not being able to believe the guy made the shot. And squirrels going through trees. One of my best effects. You know the last time a squirrel missed his footing? I keep track of these things. It was May 3, 1438.
>
> "And it's not all slapdash, either. I've got creatures so graceful, they almost break your heart... a prima ballerina. Talk about moves."
> [Hunting the Divine Fox, p. 3]

The oldest of our traditions is a joyous, lusty affirmation of the creation. God, it turns out, is the ultimate materialist. God loves the creation. The human body was God's idea. Human sexuality is God's plan. Human beings contain God's image.

That's first. The second part is equally important. God the creator is not finished yet. Death happens. Things come to an end. But the process of creation continues. God is also provider... in spite of the limits of the creation or the part of the creation we can see. The oyster never saw a squirrel, or Michael Jordan, or Margot Fonteyn.

Those Pilgrims at the Massachusetts Bay Colony with their backs to the wilderness and just enough food for one winter had a deep trust that they would not be abandoned. It was not a superficial matter with them. God as provider did not mean that they would be delivered from all the dangers and challenges which confronted them. I am always moved by the reminder that every single family in that colony had buried one of its own that terrible first winter; day after day digging graves in the frozen earth to bury their children. Theirs was no sunny and superficial spirituality. What they believed, apparently, was that the God who created the world and everything in it, would give them the resources they needed: courage and strength, grace, love and above all, the ability to trust that they were not alone, that regardless of what happens to them they move in some way - some ultimate way - safe in God's providence.

There is about us, apparently because we are made in God's own image, a hunger that is not satisfied by food. So Jesus one day, teaching his disciples said:

> "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

God the creator and provider does more than place us in a world which is capable of feeding and clothing us. God comes to be with us and to love us and to stand with us - even when there is not enough food, or clothing, even when we are not well, even when we know in a personal way our own mortality.

Before he was arrested and imprisoned and executed by the S. S., Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

"If we are in communion with God, nought can harm us." At a time when representatives of the government were dragging people from their homes to be summarily executed, he wrote: "We shall always be assured that he can feed his children and will not suffer them to hunger. God will help us in our hour of need." [The Cost of Discipleship, p. 161]

That is the final issue: in every season, every circumstance, when the table is laden with food and when there is no food, when we are surrounded by our families and when we are alone, when we are in the full blossom of health and when we are sick and weak, in good times and bad, in life and in death - we belong to God - our creator - our provider.

So -

> "Let all things, now living
> A song of thanksgiving
> To God our Creator
> triumphantly raise."

Amen.